



Written submission to the follow-up inquiry into  
child care and parental employment  
by the Equality and Social Justice Committee,  
Government of Wales  
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Thank you for inviting me to contribute to the work the Equality and Social Justice Committee of the Senedd Cymru is undertaking. I congratulate you for following up the 2022 child care inquiry “to see what progress has been made and what work there is still to do to improve child care provision in Wales”. This important step of assessing progress and making adjustments for improvement is too frequently left out of policy-making.

My written comments include:

- For context, an introduction to myself and my organization, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit;
- For context and understanding, a bit about Canada and its approach to social programs, especially early childhood education and care (ECEC);
- Five key points relevant to Canada and its newest social program, early learning and child care, that may be of interest for Wales.

#### The Childcare Resource and Research Unit

To situate myself in the child care (early childhood education and care or “early learning and child care” (which is the current Canadian term): I’m a social policy researcher, leading a small NGO ECEC policy institute, which I founded in the early 1980s. The Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) was originally part of the University of Toronto and is now an independent non-partisan ECEC policy research institute with a mandate to work towards an equitable, high quality, publicly funded, inclusive early learning and child care system for all.

CRRU has long been engaged in policy research and in raising awareness that well-designed high quality ELCC can serve multiple groups simultaneously – women, children, families, the broader society and the economy. Our perspective is that solid data, research, information, policy analysis and specialized knowledge are important tools for policy-making, advocacy and

public education. I work across disciplines and across Canada, and have been involved in international ECEC work over the years. As one of the feminist activists at the core of the diverse social movement that has been advocating for a Canada-wide universal, public, equitable child care system for almost 50 years, I'm also engaged with social justice, feminist, anti-poverty groups, unions and child care sector organizations, with other researchers, with advocates and with policy makers at all levels of government.

### The context for Canadian social programs

Canada, with a population of 40 million occupies a land mass of almost 10 million square kilometers. Canada is a country of immigrants; the latest Census (2021) shows that 23% of the population was born outside Canada (now mostly from Asia, the Middle East and Africa), with the Indigenous population making up 5%. Canada, like the UK, is considered to be a liberal-democratic state ideologically. This, and that Canada is a decentralized federation of ten provinces and three territories, which are primarily the responsibility of provinces/territories, is especially significant for its social programs, with the federal government's role often contested politically. There is no federal role in education, not even a national department of education.

### Early childhood education and care across Canada and a new approach

Before 2021, several successive federal governments had attempted to initiate a national, or Canada-wide child care plan but none was successful. As there was no earmarked Canada-wide child care funding or program, the market-driven patchwork of mostly parent fee-funded child care services were too costly for most parents. Child care programs were in short supply and inequitably distributed, and too often did not provide programs of high enough quality to be reliably developmentally beneficial to children. Kindergarten, under education ministries, was introduced in a few parts of Canada before 1900 but although kindergarten grew to become widespread before the 1960s, it remained part-time (2.5 hrs a day), with provision only for five-year-olds (the year before compulsory school begins) until about 15 years ago. In 1997, Quebec began to shift its child care approach to a more universal, publicly funded model but persistent

shortages of places and concerns about poor quality mean that today Quebec child care [illustrates](#) “what not to do” as much as modelling “what to do”.

As early as the 1970s, universal provision of publicly funded child care became a key issue for feminists and their allies such as labour unions and social justice organizations. Over the years, this loose coalition developed a consolidated policy position that child care services should be publicly funded, accessible to all children, developed as not-for-profit and public services and that decent jobs and working conditions for the mostly all-female child care workforce were a priority. When the federal government – motivated by the pandemic-created child care crisis and parallel drop in women’s labour force participation – decided to fund and shape a Canada-wide approach to building a child care system, a number of the key elements of the child care movement’s position became part of the public policy agenda.

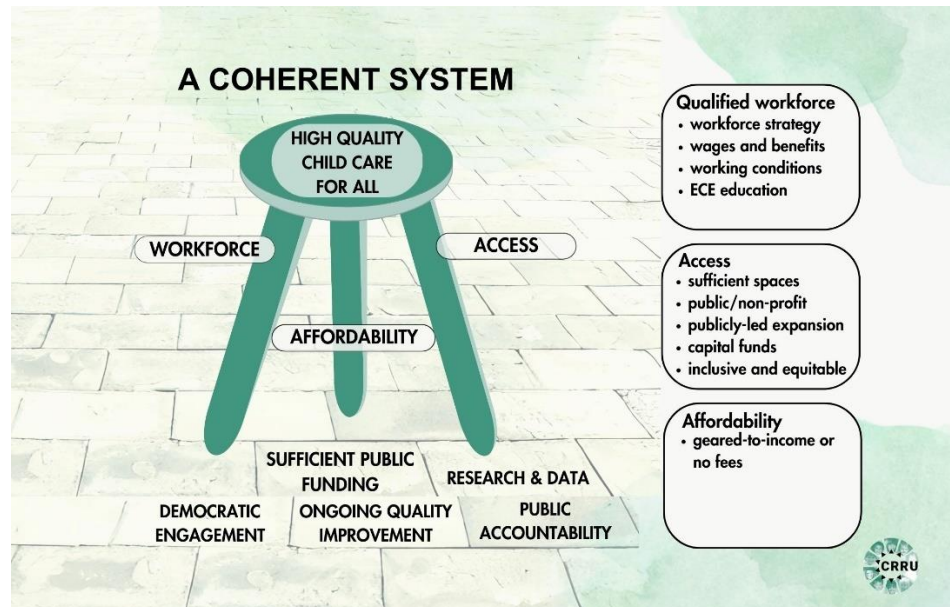
It is three years since the April 2021 federal commitment of substantial public money was made available to each province and territory with some conditions for implementation. Thus far, there have been significant advances as well as substantial bottle necks. Of these, the biggest success has been that [all parent fees](#) were (approximately) cut in half in the first year, and then further reduced to an average of \$10 a day (per child). This was accomplished by the federal government requirement that provinces/territories each set up a mechanism for using federal funds to cover services’ operations that had been funded with parent fees. While this is been uneven in execution (especially as there are two levels of government involved and some provinces/territories are more enthusiastic than others), overall, parents are paying very significantly reduced fees for regulated child care. Eight provinces/territories have already moved to a maximum fee of \$10 a day, with fees further subsidized for lower income families. Some provinces/territories stipulate that parents must be employed or studying but the federal government does not require this despite its primary focus on mothers’ employment.

While this to a large extent (not entirely) addressed what had been one of the key barriers to child care access – unaffordable fees— there are still only enough regulated child care centre<sup>1</sup> spaces to cover 28% of 0 - 5 year olds. As well, the lack of sufficient numbers of qualified early childhood educators is not only holding back expansion of services but is impeding full operation of already-existing spaces and is a barrier to improving child care quality.

Observations

Based on my observations, work that I’ve done and learning from experience and research inside and outside Canada’s borders, there are at least five points that emerge as of possible interest for the Senedd Cymru inquiry:

1. Moving what has always been a child care market to a mature child care system is a multi-year and multi-faceted process, with most parts best developed through coherent public policy for success. Though building the system will be – by its nature –incremental, key parts (such as incrementally but urgently beginning to grow the supply of services, as well as addressing critical child care workforce issues) must all be attended to simultaneously. As the below diagram shows, for ECEC, the whole is demonstrably greater than the sum of the parts.



<sup>1</sup> Note that all provinces/territories also provide regulated family (home) child care but these play a relatively minor role. Data breaking enrolment in these is usually not available by age group.

Thus, primarily addressing parent fees, or costs (usually through demand-side mechanisms such as vouchers or parent benefits) while assuming that the supply of services will emerge in response to market forces with little public management beyond regulation, has generally been the pattern in the UK, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and – until now, Canada. Based on what we have seen – and in contrast to more mature well-developed ECEC systems such as, for example, [Denmark](#) – we are convinced that development of a sufficient supply of public and non-profit services must be publicly led and managed if child care provision is to be inclusive, equitable and responsive to parents’ and children’s needs. Together with this, a qualified workforce must be supported and nurtured through such strategic policy tools as wage grids, unionization, public management of working conditions and ECE pre-service and in-service education.

2. Your question: “does child care provision in Canada support child development, tackle child poverty, and parental employment”? is a good one. The *intention* in Canada is that child care provision can and should do all these (and in Canada, enhancing women’s equality would be added to the list of goals), as the principles for the program and the new [federal legislation](#) suggest. But – as building the system is still in the early stages – the intention is still too often not met. Indeed, this is one of the key arguments for moving from the market to a universal system, as these kinds of goals are less likely to be accomplished without specifically designed public policy. An important lesson we have learned is that well-designed public policy in multiple areas is fundamental to building a quality child care system.

For example, we know from research that child care programs that are high quality can benefit children’s development and well-being, and that poor quality programs may even be harmful, especially for lower income children. Although we lack sufficient research on quality in Canada, we believe that our child care provision is generally not of consistently high quality, in part from such research as is available and in part because our requirements for educator training are too low. A wealth of best practice considerations that contribute to quality have emerged, much of it coming from [work](#) in the [European Union](#). Although the Canadian child care plan is to build a

system that “gives children the best start in life”, we are not yet meeting or heeding many of the best practice concepts identified. Thus, before we can say that child care provision is supporting children’s development, we would need to know where that quality of our child care programs falls. What is clear, however, many of the elements of quality are known and well researched and amenable to public policy.

Similarly, the idea that high quality child care is part of a package of policies to ameliorate child poverty has long been a Canadian consideration, both for governments and advocates. Our main anti-child poverty organization, [Campaign 2000](#), has long advocated for universal child care along with affordable housing, better employment standards, child benefits and other policies. While Canada lacks the data to understand in a granular way how and why racialized/lower income/newcomer/more marginalized families are less likely to use regulated child care, [research](#) CRRU carried out last year shows that the supposition that these families are under-represented appears to be correct. As the research report discusses, there are likely multiple reasons for this, ranging from poor information or knowledge, not speaking the language, to the inequitable distribution of services through market means that fails to locate them in lower income marginalized neighbourhoods. Again, public planning and policy is shown to be the best practice for solving these issues of exclusion.

Finally, with regard to parents’ employment: if child care is to permit or encourage parents to be employed it has to be set up to support their employment schedules. This is why part-day early childhood education programs – while nice for the children who attend – are unlikely to support mothers’ employment. Similarly, [non-standard hours child care](#) – whether it is child care that is open only a few hours longer than normal or child care until midnight – is sometimes needed to support parents’ employment schedules. But again, understanding the specifics so as to provide responsive program development requires [public processes](#) including research and program development, rather than waiting for individuals or voluntary organizations to decide to set up services.

3. An issue that has always been prominent in Canadian considerations of child care is ownership of the services. Based on research and experience in [Canada](#), especially in [Quebec](#), and in other countries such as the [UK](#), the [US](#), [New Zealand](#), Australia and others, the new Canada-wide child care program is predicated on the federal condition that expansion of services will be “primarily public and non-profit” and clear “accountability frameworks” would be applied to the public spending so it is not syphoned off by owners or stakeholders. The “primarily public and non-profit” condition is included in the new federal legislation and in all the agreements for use of the federal funds by provinces and territories but the language is not very specific. As a result, and given the concern that private equity firms are likely to try to exploit Canada’s new public funding as they have in child care and other care sectors in many countries, discussion and debate about the role of for-profit child care in the new system are active and ongoing.
  
4. Another key Canadian issue that may be of interest for the inquiry is that of the child care workforce. We know from research that – to a large extent – the quality of early childhood education and care rests on the training and education of the child care workforce as well as on their wages and working conditions. Additionally, it is not possible to expand child care supply without qualified workers to staff quality programs, so the current child care workforce crisis that Canada is experiencing is significant.

Difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified childcare staff has long been a feature of Canadian child care but these issues were exacerbated by the pandemic. All regions of Canada are now struggling with staff shortages as we attempt to transform child care, and have introduced a diversity of remedies. However, the issues such as low wages, benefits, poor working conditions and weak support not yet been addressed with sufficient breadth and depth to yield results. As virtually all the key goals for ECEC – high quality, greater coverage, inclusion – hinge on the presumption that a sufficient number of qualified staff will be available to provide quality child care for a diversity of families and children, solutions – including adequate publicly funded wages and benefits – merit serious attention.



5. A final point of which we are well aware in Canada is that good data and research are integral to good policy making, understanding what (or if) progress is being made, or what the scope and details of problems are. This is not new: this point has long been made about ECEC policy (for example, by the [OECD](#), in particular Chapter 4, pgs. 133 - 135) but Canada has not yet come close to addressing this issue. From my perspective, the lack of good data and research is a barrier to building and improving an effective early learning and child care system.